Cacao Processing and Bioactive Retention: The Distinct Position of Mindanao Tableya in Philippine Chocolate Traditions and Industry

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Chocolate ranks among the most widely consumed foods worldwide, yet its sensory appeal and nutritional properties depend heavily on the extent of processing applied to the cacao bean and the deliberate addition of sugar. This paper examines three distinct points along the cacao processing continuum: minimally processed cacao products, the traditional Philippine Mindanao tableya, and conventional finished chocolate. Minimally processed cacao, often marketed as raw or lightly handled beans, nibs, or powder, undergoes the fewest transformations after fermentation and drying, thereby preserving the highest concentrations of native bioactive compounds such as flavanols. Mindanao tableya occupies an intermediate position as a culturally embedded product in which roasted cacao beans are ground into pure chocolate liquor and molded into tablets or discs with no added sugar, serving as the essential ingredient for the thick, frothy local beverage tsokolate. Finished chocolate, by contrast, incorporates substantial added sugar along with extensive mechanical refining, conching, and tempering that further modify both texture and chemical composition. Drawing upon food science, nutrition research, Philippine agricultural history, and contemporary industry data, the analysis traces processing pathways, quantifies differential retention of key bioactives, explores the unique heritage and everyday uses of tableya, and situates Mindanao production within broader questions of sustainability, smallholder livelihoods, and quality differentiation. By clarifying these distinctions the paper provides a foundation for informed consumer choices, cultural preservation, and strategic development of the Philippine cacao sector.

Keywords: cacao processing, Mindanao tableya, flavanol retention, tsokolate, Philippine cacao industry, bioactive compounds, chocolate processing, Theobroma cacao, traditional cacao products, sustainable agriculture, cultural food heritage, nutrition science.

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1. The Botany, Biochemistry, and Primary Production of Cacao

The cacao tree provides the sole botanical source for all forms of cacao, tableya, and chocolate. Understanding its growth requirements, reproductive biology, and the initial chemical makeup of its seeds establishes the foundation for every subsequent processing decision and product differentiation. The species exhibits highly specific environmental needs that limit commercial cultivation to narrow equatorial bands while simultaneously concentrating production in regions such as West Africa and, increasingly, parts of Southeast Asia including the southern Philippines. These biological and geographic constraints directly influence bean quality, yield stability, and the economic viability of traditional versus industrial pathways.

1.1 Botanical Characteristics of Theobroma cacao

Theobroma cacao is an understory evergreen tree belonging to the family Malvaceae. In cultivation it typically reaches heights of four to eight meters, although wild specimens in primary rainforest may grow taller. The trunk is relatively slender and often branches low, creating a dense canopy that shades the developing pods. A distinctive feature is cauliflory, in which flowers and subsequent fruit arise directly from the bark of the trunk and older branches rather than from new leafy shoots. This adaptation allows pods to develop in the humid, protected microclimate close to the ground.

Flowers are small, approximately one to two centimeters in diameter, with pinkish-white petals and a complex structure that requires specific pollinators. In natural settings, tiny midges of the family Ceratopogonidae perform the majority of pollination, although hand pollination is sometimes practiced in commercial plantings to improve fruit set. Each flower possesses numerous stamens and a single pistil; successful fertilization leads to pod development over five to six months.

The tree demands a hot, humid climate with consistent rainfall and temperatures between 18 °C and 32 °C. It grows best on well-drained, slightly acidic soils rich in organic matter and performs poorly under prolonged drought or waterlogging. Shade from taller companion trees or artificial structures is beneficial during early growth, although mature trees tolerate more direct light. These strict requirements restrict large-scale production to latitudes roughly ten degrees north and south of the equator, creating the global pattern in which West Africa currently supplies the bulk of world beans while smaller but expanding industries exist in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

1.2 Pod Structure, Bean Composition, and Initial Chemical Profile

Mature pods measure fifteen to thirty centimeters in length and weigh between three hundred and five hundred grams when ripe. External color shifts during ripening from green or yellow through various shades of red, orange, or purple depending on variety. The thick, woody husk

encloses twenty to fifty seeds embedded in a sweet, white, mucilaginous pulp. This pulp, rich in fermentable sugars and pectin, plays an essential role in the early biochemical transformations that occur after harvest.

Fresh cacao beans contain approximately fifty to sixty percent water. On a dry-weight basis the dominant constituents include cocoa butter (the fat fraction that will later become the characteristic melt of chocolate), proteins, carbohydrates, and a complex mixture of polyphenols. Total phenolic content in unfermented, dried beans commonly ranges from twelve to eighteen percent, with the majority belonging to the flavan-3-ol class. The principal monomeric flavanol is (−)-epicatechin, accompanied by smaller amounts of (+)-catechin and oligomeric procyanidins. These compounds contribute both to the initial astringency and bitterness of raw material and to the potential health-related properties that diminish or transform during later processing.

Additional bioactive molecules present at harvest include the methylxanthines theobromine (typically three to four percent dry weight) and caffeine (around 0.2 percent). The pulp surrounding the beans supplies readily metabolizable sugars that fuel microbial activity once pods are opened. Mineral content features notable levels of magnesium, potassium, and iron, while the protein fraction contains storage proteins that undergo partial hydrolysis during fermentation. Because these initial constituents set the upper limits for what can be retained or modified downstream, any discussion of nutrient retention in minimally processed cacao, tableya, or finished chocolate must begin with the composition established inside the intact pod.

1.3 Global and Philippine Production Contexts

World cacao bean production exceeds five million metric tons annually, with the overwhelming majority originating from smallholder farms in West Africa. Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana together account for roughly seventy percent of global supply, followed by Indonesia, Ecuador, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Production systems range from low-input, shade-grown agroforestry to more intensive monoculture plantings. Yield per hectare varies widely according to variety, soil fertility, pest pressure, and management practices, with average farm-level outputs often below one ton of dry beans per hectare.

The Philippines occupies a modest but strategically positioned place within this global picture. National output has fluctuated between roughly eight thousand and ten thousand metric tons of dry beans in recent years, with the Davao Region in Mindanao contributing approximately seventy to eighty percent of the total. The island’s equatorial climate, volcanic soils, and relatively even rainfall distribution create favorable conditions for cacao, although typhoon exposure and seasonal dry spells can affect yields. Most Philippine cacao derives from Trinitario-

type hybrids that combine the hardiness of Forastero with some of the finer flavor attributes associated with Criollo ancestry. Small numbers of higher-value Criollo-influenced plantings exist, often managed by specialty producers seeking differentiation in premium markets.

Historically, cacao reached the Philippines through Spanish colonial trade routes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, initially via Mexico. Early plantings occurred in Batangas and other Luzon areas before the crop found its most suitable environment in Mindanao during the twentieth century. Government programs and private investment have periodically sought to expand area and improve productivity, yet the country remains a net importer of cacao products because domestic processing capacity and bean volume have not kept pace with rising local demand for both traditional tableya and modern chocolate. This production context directly shapes the availability and character of Mindanao tableya, which draws upon locally grown beans processed through relatively simple, often small-scale methods that preserve the link between farm and traditional foodways.

2. Fermentation, Drying, and Roasting as Foundational Processing Steps

These three operations convert the perishable contents of the freshly harvested pod into a stable, storable commodity whose flavor precursors and chemical profile will determine the character of every downstream product. Although the sequence is shared across minimally processed cacao, traditional tableya, and industrial chocolate, the degree of control, duration, and equipment employed at each stage creates measurable divergence in final composition and sensory attributes. In particular, the handling of fermentation and roasting exerts a decisive influence on the retention of native bioactives and the development of the roasted, chocolate-like notes that distinguish tableya from both raw cacao and heavily refined commercial bars.

2.1 Biochemical Changes During Fermentation

Once ripe pods are harvested and opened, the beans and surrounding sweet pulp are transferred to heaps, boxes, or baskets for a controlled microbial fermentation lasting three to seven days. The process begins with yeasts that rapidly consume pulp sugars and produce ethanol and carbon dioxide under initially anaerobic conditions. As oxygen penetrates the mass and temperature rises, lactic acid bacteria become dominant, lowering pH and generating lactic acid. In the final phase, acetic acid bacteria oxidize ethanol to acetic acid, releasing additional heat that can elevate internal temperatures to 45–50 °C. This thermal and chemical environment kills the bean embryo, disrupts cell membranes, and allows pulp-derived compounds to diffuse inward.

The most consequential biochemical shifts occur inside the cotyledons. Polyphenols undergo oxidation and polymerization, markedly reducing astringency and bitterness. Storage proteins

are partially hydrolyzed by endogenous proteases into free amino acids and small peptides that later serve as Maillard reaction substrates. Sucrose is cleaved into glucose and fructose, providing reducing sugars essential for flavor development during roasting. Acetic acid and ethanol penetrate the beans, contributing to the acidic notes that will be modulated in subsequent steps. Because these reactions are driven by microbial succession and spontaneous heat generation rather than precise external control, outcomes vary with heap size, turning frequency, ambient temperature, and bean variety.

Traditional Mindanao tableya production sometimes employs abbreviated or minimal fermentation, or even omits the step entirely in certain rural practices. The resulting beans retain higher levels of native polyphenols and exhibit a more pronounced bitterness and astringency that become part of the distinctive rustic profile of the finished tablets. In contrast, industrial chocolate manufacturing standardizes fermentation duration and turning schedules to achieve reproducible precursor profiles suited to large-scale roasting and conching. These differences in fermentation intensity therefore constitute one of the primary points of divergence among the three product categories under consideration.

2.2 Sun Drying and Moisture Management

Following fermentation, the beans are spread in thin layers on mats, platforms, or concrete floors and sun-dried for five to ten days until moisture content falls to approximately six to eight percent. This reduction is critical for two reasons: it halts further microbial activity that could lead to spoilage, and it stabilizes the beans for storage and transport. In regions with reliable sunshine, such as Mindanao, sun drying remains the predominant method and imparts no additional heat beyond ambient solar warming.

Drying must proceed at a controlled rate. Rapid surface drying can form a hardened outer layer that traps internal moisture, leading to subsequent mold growth or uneven fermentation continuation. Slow, even drying permits residual enzymatic and chemical reactions to continue at low levels, further refining flavor precursors without excessive polyphenol loss. During this phase, volatile acids formed in fermentation gradually dissipate, softening the sharp acidity that would otherwise carry forward into the roasted product.

In traditional tableya workflows, sun drying is often performed on small batches with frequent turning by hand, allowing close monitoring of color and texture changes. Industrial operations may supplement or replace sun drying with mechanical dryers when weather is unreliable, introducing the possibility of higher or more uniform temperatures that accelerate moisture removal but can also accelerate unwanted oxidative losses. The moisture target itself remains consistent across pathways because excessively moist beans will not store safely, while over-dried beans become brittle and lose desirable plasticity during later grinding.

2.3 Roasting Parameters and Flavor Precursor Development

Roasting constitutes the first deliberate thermal treatment that generates the characteristic chocolate aroma. Typical conditions range from 120 °C to 160 °C for twenty to forty minutes, although exact time–temperature combinations vary according to bean origin, desired flavor intensity, and equipment. Heat triggers the Maillard reaction between reducing sugars and amino acids or peptides generated during fermentation, producing a complex suite of volatile compounds including pyrazines, aldehydes, and furans responsible for nutty, roasted, and caramel-like notes. Strecker degradation of amino acids further contributes to the formation of key aroma molecules.

Simultaneously, roasting drives additional reductions in polyphenol content through thermal degradation and continued oxidation. Epicatechin levels decline substantially, and some epimerization to catechin occurs. These losses are greater at higher temperatures or longer durations, creating a trade-off between flavor development and retention of bioactive compounds. The process also lowers moisture to one to two percent and develops the brittle texture required for efficient cracking and winnowing.

For Mindanao tableya, roasting is frequently performed in simpler, smaller-scale equipment or even traditional setups that may reach higher surface temperatures or produce more variable results across a batch. This can yield a more pronounced roasted or slightly smoky character that becomes a signature sensory feature of authentic tableya when dissolved into tsokolate. Industrial chocolate production, by comparison, employs precisely controlled roasters with programmable profiles optimized for specific origins and end-use applications. Subsequent conching will further modify and integrate these roasted flavors, whereas tableya receives no such refining step. Consequently, the roasting parameters chosen at this stage exert a lasting influence on whether the final product leans toward the bright, fruity, high-polyphenol profile of minimally processed cacao, the robust traditional notes of tableya, or the smoother, more standardized taste of finished chocolate.

3. Secondary Processing Pathways: From Cacao Mass to Finished Products

Once the roasted beans have been cracked and winnowed to yield clean nibs, the material enters a set of secondary operations that determine the final physical form and functional properties of the product. These steps mark the clearest divergence among minimally processed cacao, Mindanao tableya, and conventional chocolate. Minimally processed cacao typically halts after modest grinding into nibs or fine powder. Tableya proceeds only through grinding into a cohesive mass that is then molded into tablets, preserving the full complement of cocoa butter and solids without any added ingredients. Finished chocolate, by contrast, subjects the mass to

fat separation, recombination with sugar and other components, prolonged mechanical working, and controlled crystallization. The choices made at this stage therefore dictate not only texture and flavor integration but also the degree to which native bioactive compounds survive into the final consumable form.

3.1 Grinding into Chocolate Liquor and Cacao Mass

The first operation converts discrete nibs into a continuous, fluid paste. Nibs are fed into stone or steel mills where mechanical shear and frictional heat progressively reduce particle size while melting the cocoa butter naturally present within the cells. As grinding continues, the mass reaches a temperature of approximately 45–60 °C, at which point the fat liquefies and coats the solid particles, producing a thick, dark liquid known as chocolate liquor or cacao mass. At this point the material is 100 percent cacao, containing roughly 50–58 percent cocoa butter and 42–50 percent non-fat cocoa solids.

Particle size distribution achieved during grinding strongly influences mouthfeel in later products. Industrial mills can reduce the majority of particles below 20–30 micrometers, yielding a smooth paste suitable for further refining. In traditional tableya production, grinding is often performed with simpler stone or disc mills that produce a coarser paste. This coarser texture becomes part of the characteristic mouthfeel when the tablets are later dissolved in hot liquid. The resulting cacao mass can be used immediately while still warm or allowed to solidify into blocks or discs. Because no fat is removed and no other ingredients are added, tableya represents cacao mass in its most direct, unadulterated tablet form.

Minimally processed or “raw” cacao pathways frequently bypass full grinding altogether or employ cold-processing techniques that avoid the heat generated by conventional milling. The resulting nibs or powders retain more of the original cellular structure and a higher proportion of heat-sensitive compounds. Consequently, the decision to grind roasted nibs into a fluid mass already separates tableya from both the least-processed cacao products and the more elaborate chocolate manufacturing route.

3.2 Pressing, Cocoa Butter Separation, and Powder Production

When the goal is to produce cocoa powder or to standardize fat content for chocolate formulation, the cacao mass is subjected to hydraulic pressing. The warm liquor is loaded into presses that apply pressures up to several hundred kilograms per square centimeter, expressing 50–60 percent of the available cocoa butter. The remaining press cake, now containing 10–24 percent residual fat depending on the degree of pressing, is cooled, broken, and ground into fine cocoa powder.

Two principal types of cocoa powder result from this step. Natural cocoa powder retains the original acidity and reddish-brown color of the pressed cake. Dutch-processed or alkalized

powder is treated with an alkali solution that raises pH, darkens color to a deep brown or black, reduces bitterness, and improves dispersibility in liquids. Alkalization also accelerates further losses of certain polyphenols. The separated cocoa butter is filtered, refined, and sometimes deodorized before being stored for later use in chocolate making or other applications.

Tableya production deliberately omits pressing. The entire fat content remains within the molded tablets, contributing to the rich mouthfeel when the product is dissolved and to the nutritional density of the pure cacao mass. This retention of full cocoa butter distinguishes tableya from both cocoa powder (which has most fat removed) and from many finished chocolates whose fat phase has been standardized through addition or removal of cocoa butter. The absence of a pressing step also means that tableya carries forward the complete lipid-soluble fraction of bioactive compounds originally present in the roasted mass.

3.3 Formulation, Conching, and Tempering in Modern Chocolate Making

Finished chocolate requires the recombination of selected components into a standardized recipe followed by extensive mechanical and thermal treatment. Chocolate liquor is blended with additional cocoa butter, granulated sugar, and, in the case of milk chocolate, milk solids or milk powder. Lecithin is frequently added as an emulsifier to improve flow properties, and vanilla or other flavorings may be introduced. The precise ratios determine whether the final product will be classified as dark, milk, or white chocolate and directly influence sweetness level, a key differentiator from both tableya and minimally processed cacao, which contain no added sugar.

The blended mixture then enters conching, a process in which the mass is continuously agitated and aerated for periods ranging from a few hours to several days at controlled temperatures between 50 °C and 80 °C. Conching serves multiple functions: it coats solid particles with a thin film of fat, reducing perceived grittiness; it drives off volatile acids and moisture that would otherwise produce sharp or sour notes; and it allows Maillard and other reactions to continue, rounding and integrating flavor. Longer conching times generally yield smoother texture and more mellow flavor but also expose the product to additional heat and oxygen that can further diminish remaining polyphenols.

After conching, the chocolate undergoes tempering, a precise sequence of heating and cooling designed to promote the formation of stable cocoa butter crystals, primarily Form V. Proper tempering produces the characteristic snap, glossy surface, and clean melting behavior expected of commercial chocolate bars. Untempered or poorly tempered chocolate exhibits bloom, a white surface discoloration caused by unstable crystal forms, and a soft or crumbly texture.

Tableya and minimally processed cacao entirely bypass both conching and tempering. The rustic texture of dissolved tableya and the granular or powdery character of raw cacao products reflect the absence of these refining operations. The addition of sugar during formulation, combined with the extensive mechanical working and thermal cycling of conching and tempering, therefore represents the final and most transformative stage that converts cacao mass into the smooth, sweetened product recognized worldwide as finished chocolate. These secondary processing decisions thus complete the spectrum that begins with the intact bean and ends with the diverse array of consumable forms available to consumers.

4. Defining and Differentiating Cacao, Mindanao Tableya, and Finished Chocolate

The terms cacao, tableya, and chocolate are frequently used interchangeably in everyday language, yet they designate three distinct points along a processing and compositional spectrum. Clear differentiation rests on two primary axes: the cumulative intensity of processing applied after harvest and the presence or absence of added sugar. These criteria produce products that differ markedly in physical form, texture, flavor delivery, nutritional density, and intended use. Mindanao tableya occupies a particularly instructive intermediate position, retaining the purity of cacao mass while adopting a traditional tablet format suited to Philippine culinary practices.

4.1 Criteria Based on Processing Intensity

Minimally processed cacao undergoes the fewest transformations. After fermentation and drying, the beans may be lightly roasted or left unroasted, then cracked into nibs or ground into powder with minimal additional heat or mechanical refinement. No fat is separated, and no other ingredients are introduced. The cellular structure of the bean remains largely intact, and the material retains the highest possible levels of native compounds present at harvest.

Mindanao tableya advances one step further along the processing pathway. The beans are fully fermented or minimally fermented according to local tradition, dried, and roasted before being ground into a cohesive cacao mass. This mass, still containing its full complement of cocoa butter and solids, is molded while warm into small tablets or discs and allowed to harden. No pressing occurs to remove fat, and no conching or tempering is applied. The result is a rustic yet stable product whose processing stops precisely at the point of forming a pure, 100 percent cacao solid.

Finished chocolate proceeds through the complete secondary processing sequence. After grinding into liquor, the mass is typically pressed to standardize or separate cocoa butter, then recombined with additional cocoa butter, sugar, and often milk solids or emulsifiers. The mixture undergoes prolonged conching to refine texture and flavor, followed by tempering to

control cocoa butter crystallization. These operations transform the original bean material into a smooth, homogeneous, and shelf-stable product whose composition and structure bear only indirect resemblance to the starting cacao mass.

The three categories therefore form a clear hierarchy of processing intensity. Minimally processed cacao stops earliest, tableya occupies the midpoint by converting roasted beans into molded mass without further refinement or additives, and finished chocolate completes the full industrial sequence. Each additional processing stage alters particle size, fat distribution, volatile composition, and bioactive retention, producing the observable differences among the final products.

4.2 Role of Added Sugar as a Defining Variable

The presence or absence of added sugar provides the second unambiguous criterion for differentiation. Minimally processed cacao and Mindanao tableya contain zero added sugar. Both products consist solely of material derived from the cacao bean itself. Any sweetness perceived when they are consumed must be introduced by the user at the point of preparation.

Finished chocolate, by definition in commercial and regulatory contexts, incorporates substantial quantities of added sugar. Typical dark chocolates contain 30 to 50 percent sugar by weight, while milk chocolates often exceed 50 percent. Even products labeled as high-percentage dark chocolate usually include sugar unless explicitly formulated as 100 percent cacao. The addition of sugar fundamentally changes the sensory profile, shifting the product from intensely bitter and astringent to balanced or sweet, and it alters nutritional density by diluting the proportion of cacao-derived solids and bioactives per serving.

Sugar addition also affects product classification and regulatory treatment. Products without added sugar remain within the domain of cacao or cacao mass derivatives, whereas the incorporation of sugar moves the material into the legal and commercial category of chocolate. This distinction has practical consequences for labeling, marketing, and consumer expectations. Tableya therefore aligns nutritionally and categorically with minimally processed cacao rather than with finished chocolate, despite its greater degree of roasting and grinding.

4.3 Resulting Physical Forms, Textures, and Typical Uses

The cumulative effects of processing intensity and sugar content manifest directly in the physical forms, textures, and customary uses of each product. Minimally processed cacao most commonly appears as whole beans, broken nibs, or fine powder. These forms are crunchy or powdery, intensely bitter, and are typically incorporated into smoothies, energy bars, baked goods, or eaten sparingly as a functional ingredient. Their texture and flavor require additional preparation or pairing to become palatable for most consumers.

Mindanao tableya takes the form of small, dense, dark tablets or discs ranging from coin-sized to larger puck-like pieces. The texture is hard and somewhat brittle at room temperature, becoming fluid when heated in liquid. Because no sugar is present, the tablets are dissolved in hot water or milk and customarily sweetened to taste by the consumer. This format supports the traditional preparation of tsokolate, a thick, frothy hot beverage, and extends to uses in champorado or other local dishes. The molded tablet shape provides convenient storage and portioning while preserving the purity of the cacao mass.

Finished chocolate is manufactured in molded bars, chips, chunks, or other shapes designed for direct consumption or incorporation into recipes. Proper tempering produces a smooth, glossy surface and a firm snap when broken. The texture melts cleanly in the mouth, delivering integrated flavor without grittiness. Because sugar is already present, the product is ready to eat without further preparation. Its uses span snacking, baking, confectionery, and beverages, with the specific formulation determining suitability for each application.

These physical and functional distinctions reinforce the underlying processing and compositional criteria. Minimally processed cacao retains the closest connection to the original bean, tableya converts that bean material into a traditional, sugar-free solid format suited to Philippine culinary traditions, and finished chocolate represents the fully transformed, sweetened, and refined product of modern industrial processing. Recognizing these differences clarifies both the nutritional implications and the cultural roles of each category within the broader cacao continuum.

5. Quantitative Effects of Processing on Flavanols and Polyphenols

The native polyphenol content of cacao beans, particularly the flavan-3-ols and their oligomeric procyanidins, undergoes progressive and often substantial reduction at every stage of processing. These losses are not uniform; they vary according to the intensity and duration of each operation, the presence of oxygen, pH shifts, and temperature exposure. Because flavanols contribute to both the potential health-related properties of cacao-derived products and to their initial bitterness and astringency, understanding the quantitative impact of processing provides a scientific basis for comparing minimally processed cacao, Mindanao tableya, and finished chocolate. Tableya, which stops short of several later industrial steps, retains an intermediate level of these compounds relative to the other two categories.

5.1 Losses During Fermentation and Drying

Fermentation produces the largest single reduction in total polyphenols and flavanols. In fresh, unfermented beans the polyphenol content can reach 12–18 percent on a dry-weight basis, dominated by (−)-epicatechin and procyanidin oligomers. During the three-to-seven-day

fermentation period, microbial activity, rising temperature, and the diffusion of acetic acid and ethanol into the cotyledons trigger extensive oxidation and polymerization of these compounds. Polyphenols migrate into the surrounding pulp or are oxidized by polyphenol oxidase enzymes released when cell membranes rupture. Reported reductions in total polyphenols during fermentation commonly range from 40 to 70 percent, with flavanol monomers such as epicatechin showing even steeper declines in many studies. Some epimerization of (−)-epicatechin to (−)-catechin also occurs under the acidic and thermal conditions inside the fermenting mass.

Subsequent sun drying continues these losses at a slower rate. As moisture is removed and beans are exposed to air and sunlight, residual enzymatic activity and non-enzymatic oxidation further degrade remaining polyphenols. Controlled slow drying minimizes additional damage compared with rapid or high-temperature mechanical drying. By the end of drying, cumulative losses from the fresh bean stage frequently exceed 50 percent for total polyphenols and can approach 70–80 percent for specific flavanols. These early reductions establish the upper limit for what can be retained in any downstream product and already differentiate minimally processed cacao, which undergoes only these initial steps, from products subjected to additional thermal and mechanical treatments.

5.2 Impact of Roasting Temperature and Duration

Roasting imposes further quantitative losses through thermal degradation, continued oxidation, and participation of polyphenols in Maillard and other browning reactions. Typical roasting conditions of 120–160 °C for 20–40 minutes generate sufficient heat to break down flavanol structures and promote their interaction with proteins, sugars, and other bean components. Studies consistently document additional reductions of 20–50 percent in remaining flavanols during roasting, with higher temperatures and longer durations producing greater losses. Epicatechin is particularly sensitive, while some oligomerization or epimerization reactions can temporarily increase the measured concentration of certain related compounds before net degradation dominates.

The development of desirable roasted flavor compounds during this stage occurs partly at the expense of native polyphenols. Pyrazines and other aroma volatiles form through pathways that consume amino acids and reducing sugars, while polyphenols undergo oxidation and polymerization that diminish both their concentration and their contribution to astringency. In traditional tableya production, roasting is sometimes conducted under less precisely controlled conditions or at slightly higher effective temperatures on smaller batches, which can accelerate polyphenol loss relative to carefully managed industrial roasters but also contributes to the distinctive robust flavor profile of the resulting tablets. Minimally processed cacao that avoids or

minimizes roasting therefore preserves substantially higher flavanol levels than either tableya or finished chocolate.

5.3 Further Reductions in Alkalization, Conching, and Final Product Stages

The most severe additional losses occur when cacao mass enters the later stages of industrial chocolate production. Alkalization, or Dutch processing, applied to cocoa powder or liquor dramatically accelerates polyphenol degradation through elevated pH and prolonged heat exposure. Reductions of 50–90 percent in remaining flavanols have been reported during alkalization, depending on alkali concentration, temperature, and treatment time. This step is deliberately avoided in tableya manufacture, allowing the product to retain more of the polyphenols present after roasting.

Conching subjects the formulated chocolate mass to extended periods of agitation, aeration, and controlled heat, typically 50–80 °C for several hours to days. The combination of mechanical shear, oxygen incorporation, and thermal stress promotes further oxidation and volatilization of remaining polyphenols. Additional losses of 10–30 percent of the flavanols present at the start of conching are common. Tempering, while primarily a crystallization control step, involves repeated heating and cooling cycles that can contribute marginal further degradation.

Taken together, the cumulative effect from fresh bean to finished chocolate bar can exceed 80–95 percent loss of original flavanols, depending on the specific processing sequence and conditions employed. Minimally processed cacao, which stops after fermentation, drying, and optional light roasting or grinding, retains the highest levels. Mindanao tableya, having undergone full roasting and grinding into mass but avoiding pressing, alkalization, conching, and sugar addition, occupies an intermediate position with moderate retention relative to both ends of the spectrum. Finished chocolate, subjected to the complete sequence including alkalization where applicable and prolonged conching, exhibits the lowest flavanol content per unit of cacao solids. These quantitative patterns directly influence the comparative nutritional positioning of the three product categories and underscore why processing choices made after roasting exert such a decisive effect on bioactive retention.

6. Nutritional Profiles and Health Implications Across the Processing Spectrum

The nutritional value of cacao-derived products is shaped by the cumulative effects of processing intensity and the presence or absence of added sugar. Minimally processed cacao, Mindanao tableya, and finished chocolate differ substantially in macronutrient density, micronutrient delivery, and the retention of bioactive compounds that may contribute to physiological effects. These differences arise directly from the processing pathways described earlier and carry implications for how each product fits into dietary patterns. Tableya,

positioned as a pure cacao mass in traditional tablet form, provides an intermediate nutritional profile that preserves more of the bean's native components than finished chocolate while remaining more accessible and palatable than many raw cacao products.

6.1 Comparative Macronutrient and Micronutrient Content

All three categories derive their primary caloric contribution from cocoa butter, the natural fat present in cacao beans. On a per-gram-of-cacao-solids basis, fat content remains relatively consistent at approximately 50–58 percent across minimally processed cacao and tableya. Finished chocolate, however, incorporates additional cocoa butter during formulation and dilutes the overall cacao solids proportion through added sugar, resulting in lower cacao-derived fat and solids per serving. Protein content, largely from storage proteins in the bean, is comparable across the three when expressed relative to cacao solids, though the absolute amount per typical serving is reduced in sweetened chocolate.

Dietary fiber is highest in minimally processed forms that retain more of the original bean matrix, including cell wall components. Tableya preserves this fiber because no pressing or extensive refining removes solids. Finished chocolate contains less fiber per serving due to both processing losses and dilution by sugar. Micronutrients such as magnesium, iron, potassium, and copper are concentrated in the non-fat cocoa solids. These minerals are delivered most efficiently in products with high cacao solids density and minimal dilution. Minimally processed cacao and tableya therefore provide greater amounts of these micronutrients per gram consumed compared with typical finished chocolate bars.

The most pronounced compositional difference lies in carbohydrate profile and added sugar. Minimally processed cacao and tableya contain no added sugar; their carbohydrates derive primarily from the bean itself and residual pulp components after fermentation. Finished chocolate contains substantial added sucrose, often comprising 30–60 percent of the product by weight. This addition increases caloric density while reducing the proportion of cacao-derived nutrients and bioactives per calorie consumed. Energy density remains high across all three due to cocoa butter, but the nutritional quality per calorie is highest in the sugar-free forms.

6.2 Bioactive Retention and Potential Physiological Effects

The flavanols and related polyphenols retained after processing constitute the most studied bioactive fraction in cacao products. As established through the quantitative losses occurring at each processing stage, minimally processed cacao retains the highest levels of these compounds. Tableya, having undergone roasting and grinding but avoiding alkalization, conching, and sugar addition, preserves an intermediate quantity. Finished chocolate exhibits the lowest retention per unit of cacao solids, particularly when alkalization is employed.

Human and epidemiological studies have associated higher flavanol intake from cacao sources with modest improvements in endothelial function, blood pressure regulation, and markers of oxidative stress and inflammation. The magnitude of these effects appears dose-dependent and is generally more pronounced with products containing higher flavanol concentrations. Because tableya delivers flavanols without the confounding factor of added sugar, it may offer a practical vehicle for obtaining these compounds in a culturally familiar format. However, bioavailability of flavanols is influenced by individual gut microbiota, food matrix, and concurrent dietary factors, and not all observed effects in short-term trials translate directly to long-term clinical outcomes.

Other bioactives present across the spectrum include the methylxanthines theobromine and, to a lesser extent, caffeine. These compounds contribute to the mild stimulant effect associated with cacao consumption and are relatively stable through processing. Theobromine content remains proportionally similar in minimally processed cacao and tableya, while finished chocolate delivers lower amounts per serving due to dilution by sugar and other ingredients. Minerals such as magnesium, which supports cardiovascular and metabolic health, are also retained more effectively in high-solids products.

It is important to note that health-related outcomes depend not only on the concentration of bioactives but also on the quantity and frequency of consumption. The intense bitterness of minimally processed cacao often limits intake to small amounts, whereas the palatability of sweetened chocolate can lead to larger servings. Tableya occupies a middle position: its flavor is robust but can be moderated by preparation method and added sweetener chosen by the consumer, potentially supporting more consistent moderate intake in traditional dietary contexts.

6.3 Considerations for Consumption Patterns and Dietary Integration

Dietary integration of these products varies according to cultural practices and individual preferences. Minimally processed cacao is typically used in small quantities as an ingredient in smoothies, baked goods, or functional snacks, where its bitterness is balanced by other flavors. Daily intake is usually modest, aligning with its high bioactive density but requiring intentional incorporation.

Mindanao tableya is traditionally dissolved in hot water or milk to prepare tsokolate, often consumed at breakfast or as an afternoon beverage. This preparation method allows portion control and customization of sweetness while delivering a concentrated dose of cacao solids in a familiar and socially embedded format. The absence of added sugar in the tablet itself means that total sugar intake can be managed according to individual needs or preferences. In Philippine dietary patterns, tableya therefore functions as both a source of cacao bioactives and a vehicle for moderate, culturally appropriate consumption.

Finished chocolate is most commonly eaten directly as a snack or incorporated into desserts and confections. Its sweetness and smooth texture encourage higher per-serving consumption compared with the other two categories. While high-cacao dark chocolate can deliver meaningful amounts of retained bioactives, the added sugar increases caloric load and may offset some metabolic benefits when consumed in large quantities. For individuals seeking to maximize flavanol intake while minimizing added sugar, tableya or high-percentage minimally processed cacao products offer clearer advantages, provided they are acceptable within personal taste preferences and dietary routines.

Overall, nutritional positioning along the processing spectrum favors products that maintain high cacao solids density and avoid unnecessary dilution by sugar. Tableya exemplifies this balance within a traditional framework, offering substantial retention of native compounds in a format suited to everyday use. Consumers and public health messaging can therefore benefit from distinguishing these categories clearly rather than treating all cacao-derived products as nutritionally equivalent.

7. Historical Introduction and Cultural Evolution of Tableya in the Philippines

The introduction of cacao to the Philippine archipelago and its subsequent transformation into tableya illustrate a process of cultural adaptation that produced a distinct intermediate product within the broader cacao processing spectrum. Unlike the heavily sweetened and refined chocolates that developed in Europe and North America, tableya emerged as a pure cacao mass molded into tablets, preserving a direct connection to the bean while fitting local tastes, preparation methods, and daily rhythms. This historical trajectory explains why Mindanao tableya continues to occupy a unique position between minimally processed cacao and finished commercial chocolate in both composition and cultural meaning.

7.1 Spanish-Era Introduction of Cacao via the Manila Galleons

Cacao originated in the tropical lowlands of Mesoamerica, where it was cultivated and consumed by Maya and Aztec societies as a bitter beverage and, at times, as a form of currency. Spanish colonizers encountered the tree and its products during the conquest of Mexico and Central America in the early sixteenth century. Through the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade, which operated from 1565 to 1815, cacao beans and knowledge of their preparation crossed the Pacific to the Philippines.

Initial plantings occurred in the early seventeenth century, with documented cultivation in Batangas and other parts of Luzon. The crop proved adaptable to certain Philippine environments, though it found its most favorable conditions later in the Visayas and especially Mindanao. Early colonial records and culinary practices indicate that the Spanish introduced

cacao primarily as a beverage prepared from ground roasted beans formed into tablets, closely resembling the Mexican chocolate de mesa tradition. These tablets were dissolved in hot water or milk and sometimes spiced, providing a model that local populations would later modify.

Because the Philippines already possessed a rich tradition of rice- and coconut-based drinks and porridges, cacao was readily incorporated into existing foodways rather than remaining an exclusively elite or foreign item. The tablet format proved practical for storage and transport in a tropical climate, facilitating wider dissemination beyond the initial planting areas. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cacao had moved from introduced novelty to established minor crop, setting the stage for localized production methods that would define tableya.

7.2 Adaptation into Indigenous Foodways and Home Production

Filipino communities adapted the introduced cacao drink to local preferences and resources. The practice of forming roasted and ground beans into small tablets or discs became widespread, particularly in rural households where commercial chocolate was unavailable or unaffordable. This home production of what came to be called tableya or tabliya involved relatively simple equipment: roasting the beans, often in clay pots or over open fires, grinding them on stone metates or later with hand mills, and molding the warm paste by hand or in simple forms.

The resulting tablets retained the full cocoa butter content and were not sweetened during manufacture. Sweetness, when desired, was added at the point of consumption, usually with muscovado sugar or other locally available sweeteners. This approach preserved the robust, sometimes smoky or bitter character of the roasted beans and aligned with indigenous preferences for strong, unsweetened bases that could be customized. In many regions, tableya production remained a domestic skill passed through generations, especially among women responsible for daily beverage preparation.

Mindanao emerged as the primary production zone because its climate, rainfall patterns, and volcanic soils supported reliable cacao yields. Smallholder farmers and household processors in Davao and surrounding areas developed and maintained the techniques that characterize traditional tableya. The absence of large-scale industrial refining in these settings meant that the product stayed close to the intermediate stage of cacao mass, never progressing to the fat separation, conching, or sugar addition that define finished chocolate. This historical continuity explains the persistence of tableya as a distinct category rather than a transitional stage toward European-style chocolate.

7.3 Enduring Role in Daily Life and Festive Practices

Tableya became embedded in everyday Philippine food culture, most visibly in the preparation of tsokolate. The thick, frothy beverage made by dissolving tablets in hot water or milk and

whisking vigorously with a batidor remains a common breakfast accompaniment, often served with pandesal or other bread. It also features in champorado, a chocolate rice porridge that blends indigenous rice dishes with the introduced cacao. These preparations allow families to control sweetness and consistency according to taste and occasion.

Beyond daily use, tableya carries social and emotional significance. It evokes nostalgia and continuity with previous generations, particularly in households where commercial chocolate arrived later or remained secondary to homemade versions. During holidays, fiestas, and family gatherings, tsokolate prepared from tableya frequently appears as a gesture of hospitality and shared heritage. The tactile experience of breaking or grating the tablets and the ritual of whisking contribute to its enduring appeal in an era when instant powdered drinks and mass-produced bars are widely available.

Despite the growth of industrial chocolate manufacturing and imported products in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, tableya has not been displaced. Instead, it coexists with commercial chocolate, occupying a complementary niche defined by purity, tradition, and customization. Recent decades have seen renewed interest from artisanal producers in Mindanao who market tableya to urban consumers and export markets seeking authentic, minimally processed cacao products. This revival reinforces tableya's position as a culturally rooted intermediate form that preserves processing choices and flavor characteristics distinct from both raw cacao and fully refined chocolate.

The historical development of tableya thus demonstrates how an introduced crop and preparation method were reshaped by local ecology, domestic technology, and cultural preferences into a stable product category. Its persistence highlights the value placed on sugar-free cacao mass in tablet form and explains why Mindanao tableya continues to serve as a meaningful reference point when comparing processing pathways and nutritional profiles across the cacao spectrum.

8. Mindanao Cacao Production Systems, Varieties, and Industry Dynamics

Mindanao, and particularly the Davao Region, constitutes the core of Philippine cacao production and the primary source of beans used for traditional tableya. The region's agroecological conditions, combined with a production structure dominated by smallholder farms, have shaped both the volume and the character of cacao available for local processing into tableya and for emerging fine chocolate manufacturing. Understanding these systems reveals how environmental factors and farm-level realities influence the quality and consistency of the intermediate cacao mass that becomes tableya, while also highlighting the pressures and opportunities facing the broader Philippine cacao sector.

8.1 Agroecological Advantages of the Davao Region

The Davao Region lies near the equator, providing the consistent warmth, high humidity, and relatively even rainfall distribution that cacao requires for year-round growth and pod production. Temperatures typically remain within the optimal range of 18–32 °C, with minimal seasonal extremes that can stress the tree or reduce flowering. Annual rainfall in many cacao-growing areas of Davao exceeds 2,000 millimeters and is distributed across most months, supporting continuous vegetative growth and pod development without the pronounced dry seasons that limit production in other regions.

Volcanic soils derived from the region's geological history are generally deep, well-drained, and rich in minerals and organic matter when managed properly. These soils provide the nutrient base and physical structure favorable for cacao root development. The varied topography of Davao, including rolling hills and protected valleys, creates microclimates that offer some buffering against extreme weather events, although the region remains exposed to typhoons and occasional drought episodes associated with El Niño cycles.

These combined conditions explain why Davao accounts for approximately 70–80 percent of national cacao output. The same environmental advantages that support reliable bean production also underpin the viability of small-scale and household-level processing into tableya, as fresh beans can be handled locally with minimal post-harvest losses when basic fermentation and drying infrastructure is available. The alignment between agroecology and traditional production methods has helped preserve tableya as a living product category rather than a historical artifact.

8.2 Dominant Varieties and Smallholder Farming Structures

Philippine cacao plantings are dominated by Trinitario-type hybrids that combine the yield stability and disease resistance of Forastero ancestry with some flavor attributes derived from Criollo lines. These hybrids perform reliably under the variable management conditions typical of smallholder farms and produce beans suitable for both traditional tableya and higher-value chocolate applications. Limited plantings of more delicate Criollo-influenced varieties exist, primarily among producers targeting premium or single-origin markets, but they remain a small fraction of total area.

Most cacao in Mindanao is grown on smallholder farms ranging from less than one hectare to a few hectares. These farms are frequently family-operated and often integrate cacao with other crops such as coconut, banana, or fruit trees in agroforestry or intercropping systems. Intercropping provides shade during the early years of cacao establishment, diversifies income, and can improve overall farm resilience. Many smallholders practice relatively low-input management, relying on manual labor for pruning, harvesting, and basic pest control.

This smallholder-dominated structure has direct implications for tableya production. Beans from numerous dispersed farms are aggregated through local traders or cooperatives before reaching processors. Variability in fermentation and drying practices at the farm level can influence the consistency of beans destined for tableya, although experienced local processors have developed methods to manage this heterogeneity. The decentralized nature of production also supports the continuation of home and small-scale tableya making in rural communities, where families process their own or neighbors' beans using traditional techniques.

8.3 Current Output, Challenges, and Emerging Opportunities

National dry bean production in the Philippines has hovered between roughly 8,000 and 10,000 metric tons in recent years, with Davao contributing the large majority. This volume falls short of domestic demand, which includes both traditional tableya consumption and growing industrial and artisanal chocolate manufacturing, resulting in continued imports of beans and semi-processed products. Average yields per hectare remain modest by international standards, reflecting the predominance of smallholder systems and variable access to improved planting material, inputs, and technical knowledge.

Key challenges include pest and disease pressure, particularly cocoa pod borer and vascular streak dieback, which can cause significant losses when not adequately managed. Climate variability, including stronger typhoons and irregular rainfall patterns, adds risk to production. Post-harvest handling at the farm level sometimes results in inconsistent fermentation and drying, affecting bean quality for both tableya and premium chocolate. Economic pressures, including relatively low farmgate prices and limited access to credit or stable markets, constrain investment in productivity improvements or quality-focused practices.

Despite these constraints, several developments point toward opportunities. Government roadmaps and support programs aim to expand planted area and raise productivity while promoting quality differentiation. Growing international and domestic demand for traceable, fine-flavor, and sustainably produced cacao has encouraged some Mindanao farmers and cooperatives to adopt better post-harvest practices and seek certification or direct linkages with specialty buyers. The parallel growth of artisanal chocolate makers in Davao who produce both tableya and tree-to-bar chocolate creates new market channels that reward quality and can return higher value to producers.

These dynamics directly affect the future of tableya. Continued smallholder production of sound beans supports the traditional supply chain for local tableya, while quality improvements open possibilities for premium tableya positioned alongside fine chocolate. The interplay between agroecological strengths, smallholder realities, and emerging market opportunities will

therefore determine whether Mindanao maintains its role as the primary source of beans for both everyday tableya and higher-value cacao products within the Philippine context.

9. Traditional Preparation Methods and Cultural Significance of Tsokolate

The preparation of tsokolate from Mindanao tableya represents one of the most direct and culturally embedded expressions of the intermediate position that tableya occupies in the cacao processing spectrum. Unlike finished chocolate, which is formulated with sugar and refined for immediate consumption, tableya requires transformation through heat and manual agitation to release its qualities. This preparation process, centered on the batidor and the deliberate addition of sweetness by the user, preserves both the purity of the cacao mass and a set of sensory and social practices that distinguish tsokolate from commercial hot chocolate beverages.

9.1 Core Techniques Using Tableya and the Batidor

Traditional preparation begins with breaking or grating the hard tableya tablets into smaller pieces to facilitate dissolution. The fragments are placed in a pot or pitcher with hot water or milk and allowed to soften. Vigorous whisking with the batidor, a wooden beater with a carved or bundled end, serves multiple functions: it breaks down the cacao mass, disperses the cocoa butter throughout the liquid, and incorporates air to produce the characteristic thick froth. The motion is rhythmic and sustained, often for one to several minutes, until the mixture achieves a smooth, emulsified consistency without visible lumps.

The resulting beverage is notably thicker than most Western-style hot chocolate, sometimes approaching a light porridge texture when prepared with minimal liquid. Because tableya contains no added sugar, sweetness is introduced separately according to individual or household preference, most commonly with muscovado or refined sugar stirred in at the end. This customization allows the drink to range from robustly bitter to moderately sweet while keeping the core flavor derived entirely from the roasted cacao mass. The manual nature of the whisking also contributes to the sensory experience; the sound, texture, and gradual transformation of the mixture are integral to the traditional method.

Temperature control matters. The liquid should be hot enough to fully melt the cocoa butter but not so boiling that it scorches the cacao or creates an undesirable skin. Many practitioners heat the liquid first, then add the tableya off the heat or over very low flame while whisking. The final drink is often served immediately while the froth is still prominent, although it can be reheated gently if needed. These techniques highlight tableya's design as a concentrated cacao product meant to be reconstituted rather than consumed in solid form.

9.2 Regional Variations and Accompanying Foods

While the basic method using tableya and the batidor is widely shared, regional and household variations exist in liquid choice, thickness, and flavor additions. In some areas, particularly parts of Mindanao, the drink is referred to as sikwate and may be prepared with a higher proportion of water for a lighter consistency or with evaporated milk for greater richness. Certain households or regions incorporate small amounts of other ingredients, such as a spoonful of peanut butter in contemporary adaptations sometimes called tsokolate de batirol, which adds creaminess and a complementary nutty note without fundamentally altering the cacao base.

Accompanying foods are an essential part of the tsokolate experience. The drink is classically paired with pandesal or other soft breads at breakfast, allowing the bread to absorb the thick chocolate. It also features prominently in champorado, where tableya or tsokolate is combined with glutinous rice to create a comforting chocolate porridge. These pairings reflect the integration of introduced cacao into indigenous rice- and bread-based meal structures.

Variations in sweetness preference and thickness often align with age or occasion. Stronger, less sweetened versions may be favored by adults or for more robust morning consumption, while milder preparations suit children or lighter afternoon servings. Despite the availability of instant powdered chocolate drinks and commercial chocolate bars, many households maintain the tableya-and-batidor method for its superior texture and flavor, as well as for the ritual and sensory satisfaction it provides. These variations demonstrate the flexibility of tableya as a pure cacao mass that adapts to local tastes while remaining distinct from pre-sweetened finished chocolate products.

9.3 Symbolic and Social Meanings in Philippine Households

Beyond its practical role as a beverage base, tsokolate prepared from tableya carries significant symbolic and social weight. The process of making it is frequently intergenerational, with knowledge and technique passed from older to younger family members. The sound of the batidor and the aroma of dissolving tableya evoke childhood memories and a sense of continuity with family history. In many households, tsokolate represents a tangible link to pre-commercial foodways and a form of everyday heritage that persists alongside modern conveniences.

The drink also functions as an expression of hospitality. Offering freshly prepared tsokolate to guests signals care and welcome in a way that instant alternatives may not replicate. The time and attention required for proper whisking transform the act into a small ritual that strengthens social bonds. During holidays, fiestas, or family gatherings, tsokolate often appears as a comforting and familiar element that reinforces collective identity.

In contemporary contexts, including urban households and Filipino communities abroad, tableya and tsokolate retain emotional resonance even when prepared less frequently. Many people describe a preference for the robust flavor and frothy texture of traditional tsokolate over commercial hot chocolate, associating it with authenticity and comfort. The persistence of these practices alongside the growth of artisanal and industrial chocolate in the Philippines underscores tableya's enduring cultural value. It remains not merely a processing intermediate but a living element of Philippine food culture that embodies the choice to preserve a sugar-free, customizable cacao mass suited to traditional preparation and social meaning.

10. Quality Assessment, Flavor Profiles, and Distinguishing Sensory Attributes

Quality assessment of Mindanao tableya relies on observable sensory characteristics that reflect both the inherent properties of the beans and the specific processing decisions made during fermentation, roasting, and grinding. These attributes allow differentiation not only between good and poor examples of tableya but also between tableya and the other points on the cacao spectrum: minimally processed cacao and finished commercial chocolate. Because tableya is a relatively unrefined product, its sensory profile retains direct evidence of upstream choices in a way that heavily processed chocolate often obscures.

10.1 Visual, Aromatic, and Textural Indicators of Authentic Tableya

High-quality tableya typically appears as small, dense discs or tablets of deep brown to nearly black color with a matte or subtly glossy surface. Uniform coloration across a batch suggests consistent roasting and grinding. Excessive surface oiliness or visible fat separation may indicate improper cooling after molding or storage under fluctuating temperatures, while excessive dryness or crumbling can signal over-drying or poor bean quality. Authentic tableya made from 100 percent cacao should contain no visible fillers, grains, or lighter-colored inclusions.

Aroma provides one of the most immediate indicators of quality. Well-made tableya exhibits a robust roasted cacao scent with earthy, nutty, or subtly fruity undertones. Some traditional batches carry a light smoky note resulting from roasting methods or bean characteristics. Off aromas such as mustiness, mold, or excessive acidity signal problems in fermentation, drying, or storage and are generally unacceptable in good tableya.

Texture at room temperature is firm and somewhat brittle, reflecting the high cocoa butter content that has not been separated or extensively refined. When broken, the interior should appear dense and relatively uniform rather than porous or crumbly. Upon heating in liquid, quality tableya melts smoothly into a cohesive mass without leaving gritty particles, although the resulting drink retains more body and texture than highly refined commercial chocolate

beverages. These visual, aromatic, and textural cues together allow experienced users and small-scale producers to evaluate tableya rapidly and reliably.

10.2 Flavor Profiles Shaped by Fermentation and Roast Levels

The flavor of tableya when dissolved is strongly influenced by the degree of fermentation and the intensity of roasting applied to the beans. Traditional or minimally fermented tableya often presents higher bitterness and astringency, with a more direct, sometimes sharper expression of the bean's inherent character. This profile can include pronounced earthy or herbal notes and may carry a subtle smokiness when roasting has been heavy or conducted over open heat sources. Such characteristics are valued in certain rural and household contexts where a robust, unsweetened base is preferred.

Beans that undergo standard fermentation develop more complex precursor compounds, resulting in tableya with reduced harsh bitterness and greater depth once roasted. Common flavor descriptors for well-fermented and properly roasted tableya include dark chocolate, roasted nuts, subtle dried fruit, and a lingering earthy finish. The balance between bitterness, acidity, and aromatic complexity depends heavily on roast level. Lighter to moderate roasting preserves brighter fruit or floral notes when present in the beans, while heavier roasting emphasizes deeper, more caramelized or smoky tones.

Because tableya is consumed after dissolution rather than as a solid confection, its flavor is experienced in the context of hot liquid and any added sweetener. This preparation method highlights the full-bodied, lingering cacao character that distinguishes it from both the bright, often astringent notes of minimally processed raw cacao and the smoother, integrated flavor of conched commercial chocolate. The absence of sugar in the tablet itself means that the base flavor remains intense and directly traceable to the roasted cacao mass.

10.3 Comparison with Commercial Chocolate and Raw Cacao Products

When compared with finished commercial chocolate, tableya displays markedly higher bitterness and a more rustic texture even after dissolution. Commercial chocolate has undergone conching and tempering that round sharp edges and create a silky mouthfeel; tableya, lacking these steps, delivers a bolder, more direct cacao impact with noticeable body in the prepared drink. The lack of added sugar further accentuates this difference, positioning tableya as a customizable base rather than a ready-to-eat sweet product.

Relative to minimally processed or raw cacao, tableya exhibits more developed roasted and chocolate-like flavors resulting from deliberate roasting and grinding. Raw cacao nibs or powders often present brighter, fruitier, or more astringent notes with less of the rounded depth associated with roasted products. Tableya therefore sits between the two extremes: it has moved beyond the green, vegetal, or highly astringent character sometimes found in

unroasted cacao while retaining more intensity and less refinement than heavily processed chocolate.

These sensory distinctions have practical consequences for use and appreciation. Consumers seeking maximum bioactive retention with minimal flavor development may prefer raw cacao products. Those desiring a smooth, sweet, immediately palatable experience gravitate toward finished chocolate. Tableya appeals to those who value a robust, traditional cacao taste that can be modulated during preparation and that carries the cultural associations of Philippine tsokolate. The ability to assess quality through straightforward sensory criteria reinforces tableya's accessibility and supports its continued role as a distinct and valued product within the broader cacao continuum.

11. Sustainability, Smallholder Livelihoods, and Strategic Development Pathways

The long-term viability of Mindanao cacao production, and by extension the continued availability of high-quality beans for traditional tableya, depends on addressing interconnected environmental, economic, and institutional challenges. Smallholder farmers, who produce the majority of Philippine cacao, face mounting pressures from climate variability, market structures, and limited resources. At the same time, growing interest in quality differentiation, traceability, and sustainable practices creates pathways for improving both environmental outcomes and rural livelihoods while preserving the cultural and nutritional value embodied in tableya.

11.1 Environmental and Climate-Related Challenges

Cacao is inherently sensitive to climate conditions, and Mindanao is experiencing shifts that affect yield stability and bean quality. Changes in rainfall patterns, including more intense wet seasons and prolonged dry periods linked to climate phenomena, can disrupt flowering, pod development, and fermentation consistency. Stronger typhoons, which have increased in frequency and intensity in recent decades, pose direct physical risks to trees and can cause significant post-harvest losses when infrastructure is limited.

Pest and disease pressure often intensifies under climate stress. Cocoa pod borer and vascular streak dieback remain persistent threats, and changing temperature and humidity regimes can expand their range or severity. Soil health also requires attention. Continuous cacao cultivation without adequate organic matter replenishment or proper shade management can lead to degradation, reduced water retention, and lower nutrient availability over time.

Agroforestry and intercropping systems, already common among Mindanao smallholders, offer partial buffers against these risks by enhancing biodiversity, improving microclimates, and

providing diversified income. However, scaling sustainable practices requires knowledge, labor, and sometimes initial investment that many smallholders find difficult to access. The environmental challenges facing cacao production therefore directly influence the reliability and quality of beans available for both everyday tableya and emerging premium products.

11.2 Economic Pressures and Market Linkage Issues

Economic constraints at the farm level significantly affect incentives for quality-focused production. Many smallholders receive relatively low farmgate prices that do not fully reflect the effort required for careful fermentation and drying. Limited access to timely market information, credit, and stable buyers reinforces a focus on volume over quality in some cases. Post-harvest losses from inconsistent drying or inadequate storage further reduce returns.

Market linkage challenges are particularly relevant for tableya and fine cacao. While traditional local markets for tableya remain relatively accessible, opportunities to capture higher value through specialty or export channels often require traceability, certification, or consistent quality standards that are difficult for dispersed smallholders to meet individually. Middlemen and traders play important roles in aggregation but can also capture a large share of the final value.

The growth of artisanal chocolate makers and quality-oriented tableya producers in Davao creates new potential market channels. When these buyers establish direct or cooperative-based relationships with farmers, they can offer premium prices that reward better post-harvest practices. However, such linkages remain limited in scale relative to overall production. Without broader improvements in market access and price signals that reward quality, many smallholders have limited economic motivation to invest in the fermentation, drying, and handling practices that produce superior beans for both traditional tableya and higher-value chocolate.

11.3 Policy, Cooperative, and Quality-Focused Initiatives

Government and institutional initiatives have sought to address these challenges through expanded planting programs, productivity improvements, and support for value addition. National and regional roadmaps emphasize increasing area under cacao while promoting better practices and market orientation. Efforts to strengthen farmer cooperatives and associations aim to improve collective bargaining power, access to inputs and training, and aggregation for more consistent supply.

Inclusive approaches that explicitly address gender dynamics and the roles of women in cacao farming and post-harvest activities have gained attention in some programs. Strengthening cooperatives can also facilitate quality improvement initiatives, such as shared fermentation and

drying facilities or training in best practices that benefit both tableya production and fine chocolate supply chains.

Quality-focused initiatives at multiple levels show particular promise for tableya. Artisanal processors and emerging chocolate makers in Mindanao are increasingly willing to pay premiums for well-fermented and dried beans, creating direct incentives for farmers. Support for certification schemes, traceability systems, and agroforestry practices can further differentiate Philippine cacao in both domestic and export markets. Linking these quality efforts to the cultural and nutritional attributes of tableya may help position it as a distinctive product with strong local roots rather than a commodity input.

The interplay of environmental pressures, economic realities, and institutional responses will determine whether Mindanao cacao production can become more resilient and rewarding for smallholders while continuing to supply the beans that sustain traditional tableya practices. Strategic pathways that combine sustainable farming methods, stronger farmer organizations, and market linkages rewarding quality offer the most constructive route forward. Such approaches can simultaneously support rural livelihoods, preserve the environmental base for cacao, and maintain the availability of high-quality tableya that carries both nutritional and cultural value within Philippine food systems.

12. Synthesis, Conclusions, and Recommendations for Research and Practice

The examination of cacao, Mindanao tableya, and finished chocolate as distinct points along a processing continuum reveals consistent patterns that connect botanical origins, biochemical transformations, nutritional outcomes, cultural practices, and industry realities. By tracing the effects of cumulative processing intensity and the presence or absence of added sugar, a coherent framework emerges for understanding why these three categories differ in composition, sensory attributes, health-related potential, and social meaning. This integrated perspective clarifies both the unique position of tableya and the broader implications for consumers, producers, and policymakers.

12.1 Integrated Understanding of the Processing Continuum

Minimally processed cacao, Mindanao tableya, and finished chocolate represent successive stages of transformation from the same botanical source. The first category stops earliest, preserving the highest levels of native flavanols and other bioactives while retaining the most direct connection to the fresh bean’s chemical profile. Tableya advances through fermentation, drying, roasting, and grinding into cacao mass but halts before fat separation, extensive refining, or the addition of any ingredients, resulting in a pure, sugar-free tablet that maintains intermediate bioactive retention and a robust, traditional flavor character. Finished chocolate

proceeds through the full sequence of pressing, formulation with sugar, conching, and tempering, producing a smooth, palatable, and shelf-stable product whose nutritional density and bioactive content are diluted by both processing losses and added sugar.

These differences are not merely technical; they shape every dimension explored in this paper. Bioactive retention declines progressively with each additional processing step, most sharply during fermentation, roasting, and especially alkalization and conching. Nutritional profiles reflect this pattern, with tableya delivering higher cacao solids density and mineral content per gram than typical finished chocolate while avoiding the sugar that defines the latter category. Sensory attributes follow accordingly: raw cacao tends toward brighter, more astringent notes; tableya offers developed roasted depth with noticeable body; and finished chocolate provides integrated smoothness and sweetness. Culturally, tableya remains embedded in Philippine daily life and ritual through tsokolate preparation, while finished chocolate operates primarily within global commercial frameworks.

The two defining criteria—processing intensity and added sugar—thus provide a reliable lens for differentiation. Tableya occupies a distinctive middle ground that preserves the purity of cacao mass in a traditional, accessible format while avoiding both the intensity of raw products and the refinement plus sweetening of industrial chocolate. This positioning explains its persistence as a living cultural product alongside the growth of modern chocolate manufacturing in the Philippines.

12.2 Implications for Nutrition Communication and Consumer Guidance

Clear differentiation among these categories carries practical consequences for nutrition communication and consumer decision-making. Treating all cacao-derived products as nutritionally equivalent obscures meaningful differences in bioactive retention, sugar content, and overall nutrient density. Public health messaging and dietary guidance would benefit from distinguishing minimally processed options, traditional tableya, and finished chocolate according to specific consumer goals.

Individuals seeking maximum flavanol intake with minimal added sugar can prioritize high-quality tableya or minimally processed cacao products, recognizing that preparation method and portion size influence actual intake. Those who value cultural continuity and customizable flavor may find tableya particularly suitable, as its traditional preparation allows control over sweetness and consistency. Consumers prioritizing convenience, immediate palatability, or specific textural experiences may prefer finished chocolate while understanding its lower relative bioactive density and higher sugar content.

Labeling and marketing practices could support better-informed choices by clearly indicating whether products contain added sugar and by providing transparent information about

processing level where relevant. Educational efforts that connect these distinctions to both health considerations and cultural heritage would help consumers navigate the spectrum more effectively. In the Philippine context, recognizing tableya's role as a sugar-free, traditionally prepared option strengthens appreciation for its nutritional and cultural contributions beyond generic "chocolate" messaging.

12.3 Priorities for Philippine Cacao Research, Policy, and Industry

Several priorities emerge for advancing both scientific understanding and practical outcomes in the Philippine cacao sector. Research should generate more precise data on flavanol and polyphenol retention specifically in tableya under varying fermentation and roasting conditions, as well as comparative studies of bioactive delivery across the three product categories in real-world consumption patterns. Climate-resilient varieties, improved post-harvest handling techniques, and sustainable agroforestry systems adapted to Mindanao conditions warrant continued investment. Investigations into the social and economic dimensions of tableya production and use can further illuminate how cultural practices intersect with quality and market development.

Policy and institutional efforts should focus on strengthening smallholder capacity through better access to training, inputs, and stable markets that reward quality. Support for cooperatives, traceability systems, and inclusive approaches that recognize women's roles in farming and processing can improve both equity and consistency of supply. Strategic promotion of Mindanao origin and traditional tableya alongside fine chocolate development can create differentiated value chains that benefit producers while preserving cultural assets.

Industry actors, including both traditional tableya processors and emerging artisanal chocolate makers, can advance these goals by investing in direct farmer relationships, quality incentives, and transparent communication about processing and origin. Balancing respect for traditional methods with innovation in sustainable practices and market linkages offers the most promising path for a resilient, equitable, and high-quality Philippine cacao sector.

In conclusion, the distinctions among minimally processed cacao, Mindanao tableya, and finished chocolate are grounded in measurable differences in processing and composition that carry consequences for nutrition, flavor, culture, and livelihoods. Tableya stands as a particularly valuable intermediate form that maintains bioactive integrity and cultural continuity in a practical, sugar-free format. Recognizing and supporting this position through informed consumer choices, targeted research, and strategic development can help ensure that the full spectrum of cacao-derived products continues to offer diverse benefits to producers and consumers alike.

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